

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. <b>PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.</b>					
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) <b>01-11-2013</b>		2. REPORT TYPE <b>FINAL</b>		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE  <b>Information Control: Preventing a “Vietnamese Spring”?</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)  <b>Tarassa Steele</b>				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)  Joint Military Operations Department Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Distribution Statement A: Public Release</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES A paper submitted to the Naval War College faculty in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Joint Military Operations Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.					
14. ABSTRACT  The Communist Party of Vietnam executes strict government control over both internet infrastructure and internet content in an effort to prevent an effective anti-regime movement from forming within its borders, similar to the movements formed in North African, Near Eastern, and Middle Eastern countries during the Arab Spring. This paper first establishes the governance structure of Vietnam and its current demographics in comparison to the demographics in the Arab Spring movement. Next, it describes Vietnam’s current internet information architecture and provides comparison to some of the North African, Near Eastern, and Middle Eastern countries. It then analyzes the evolution of the government internet control measures, describing the reasons for those measures, and also details the enforcement of those measures, which are assessed by the international community to be human rights violations. This paper argues that the control measures are an effective tool used by the government to prevent the development of an anti-regime movement, and the measures are unlikely to change. The counter-argument is then made that change may be realized through economic pressure from domestic and international business communities. Lastly, the paper provides recommendations for further research into the unintended far-reaching second and third order consequences of the strict government control measures.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS <b>Vietnam, internet, information, infrastructure, governance, demographics, human rights, anti-regime, censorship, economics</b>					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES  <b>17</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Chairman, JMO Department
a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	b. ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	c. THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)  401-841-3414

**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, R.I.**

**Information Control: Preventing a “Vietnamese Spring”?**

**by**

**Tarassa Steele**

**NGA Civilian**

**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

**Signature: \_\_\_\_\_**

**01 November 2013**

## **Contents**

Introduction	1
Background	2
Discussion	3
Government Structure in Vietnam	3
Alternate Political Parties in Vietnam	4
Demographics	5
Information Infrastructure	6
Government Regulation of the Internet	7
Content Control	10
VCP's Recipe for Party Sustainability	13
Counter-Argument	14
Conclusions	15
Recommendations	16
Bibliography	18

## **Abstract**

The Communist Party of Vietnam executes strict government control over both internet infrastructure and internet content in an effort to prevent an effective anti-regime movement from forming within its borders, similar to the movements formed in North African, Near Eastern, and Middle Eastern countries during the Arab Spring. This paper first establishes the governance structure of Vietnam and its current demographics in comparison to the demographics in the Arab Spring movement. Next, it describes Vietnam's current internet information architecture and provides comparison to some of the North African, Near Eastern, and Middle Eastern countries. It then analyzes the evolution of the government internet control measures, describing the reasons for those measures, and also details the enforcement of those measures, which are assessed by the international community to be human rights violations. This paper argues that the control measures are an effective tool used by the government to prevent the development of an anti-regime movement, and the measures are unlikely to change. The counter-argument is then made that change may be realized through economic pressure from domestic and international business communities. Lastly, the paper provides recommendations for further research into the unintended far-reaching second and third order consequences of the strict government control measures.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2011, free information environments coupled with the availability of the internet and social media programs empowered the Arab Spring movements. These movements caused some regimes to collapse and other regimes to make significant social and political changes as demanded by their people. The communist Vietnamese Government exerts significant controls on the free sharing of information within the country both through controlling internet infrastructure and content shared. Recently, internet information controls have tightened, likely in response to the Arab Spring movements. The Government enforces their control through criminal arrests and imprisonment of their people for sharing prohibited information via the internet. A recent case involved a Vietnamese elite-class lawyer sentenced to seven years in prison, who was convicted of distributing “propaganda against the state” via the internet.<sup>1</sup> Vietnam also heavily controls, taxes and fines those providing internet service to the Vietnamese population. For example, the current Vietnamese laws state that internet café owners must provide a list of its customers and websites they visited upon request.<sup>2</sup> Given the evidence of the impact of an open information environment in the Arab world, the Vietnamese Government is not likely to ease its excessive control of the country’s information environment and risk the development of an effective pro-democracy/anti-regime movement. Excessive control of information can inhibit the development of democracy. Vietnam, led by a communist government with documented human rights abuses related to information restriction, poses a challenge to United States

---

<sup>1</sup> Adam Fforde, "Vietnam in 2012: The End of the Party," *Asian Survey* 53, No. 1, 2012: 102-103.

<sup>2</sup> Bjorn Surborg, “On-line with the people in line: Internet development and flexible control of the net in Vietnam,” *Geoforum* 39 (2008): 353.

policymakers and military commanders seeking to develop mutually-beneficial diplomatic or military partnerships with the country.

## **BACKGROUND**

The year 2011 was significant for the Arab world and the larger world in general. Youthful populations in countries with economic challenges widely utilized new social media programs, such as Facebook, to organize and conduct rallies in an effort to effect regime change resulting in a better quality of life. These organizational efforts were possible due to infrastructure allowing people access to the internet and to information environments with no or limited controls on freedom of speech, specifically the sharing of anti-regime information. In Tunisia and Egypt, the protestors were successful in toppling the regimes. In Libya, with the aid of an external joint force, the people also were able to effect regime change. While a number of other regimes remained in power (Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain and Kuwait to name a few), the regimes had to accept the fact that changes would have to be made to appease these organized groups or risk more havoc within their borders. It is logical to assume that regimes outside of the Arab world, including that of Vietnam, looked upon these Arab Spring developments and discussed what efforts they would engage in to prevent this type of rebellion.

## DISCUSSION

### Government Structure in Vietnam

Vietnam is a communist state led by leaders within the Communist Party of Vietnam (VCP).<sup>3</sup> The leader is the President, with a Prime Minister and a General Secretary of the VCP also in top leadership positions. The Party's domination of the government is assured in the constitution, and therefore any alternate party formed in Vietnam would be unconstitutional. The Party controls all government entities within the country, including the military, internal security forces, and the media.<sup>4</sup> This control is viewed as necessary for the VCP to ensure survival of the communist state. Andrew Pierre stated in *Foreign Affairs* that the VCP "knows that any move towards capitalism would undoubtedly require a simultaneous political step toward a more democratic society," and that "above all, the party leadership fears social disorder and a loss of control."<sup>5</sup>

In 2007, the VCP experienced political turmoil prompted by economic issues. Adam Fforde stated in *Asian Survey* that "the VCP has increasingly been unable to meet its systemic political responsibilities" following an economic collapse caused when "state-owned enterprises ignored State Bank orders on liquidity."<sup>6</sup> Since then, Fforde assessed the VCP "lacks the political authority to drive policy development and real change."<sup>7</sup> The totalitarian VCP is seen to be disconnected from the emerging economic needs of its population, which is experiencing fledgling development of an urban middle class. The VCP

---

<sup>3</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook: East & Southeast Asia: Vietnam*, 22 August 2013, accessed 8 September 2013, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vm.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew J. Pierre, "Vietnam's Contradictions," *Foreign Affairs* 79, No. 6, (2000): 72-73.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>6</sup> Fforde, "Vietnam in 2012: The End of the Party," 102-103.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

retains control of the government in 2013, but challenges with labor market tensions and land management corruption continue to plague the Party and demonstrate their inability to effectively manage challenges and make real policy changes.<sup>8</sup> A party that is increasingly failing to effectively govern its country amid increasing internal economic pressures opens the doors to the development of alternate party movements.

### Alternate Political Parties in Vietnam

While alternate parties and democratic movements are illegal, they do exist in Vietnam. The *CIA World Factbook* lists four groups that advocate democracy: the 8406 Bloc, the Democratic Party of Vietnam, the People's Democratic Party of Vietnam, and the Alliance for Democracy.<sup>9</sup> The various groups seek to establish great individual freedoms and a multi-party democratic government with free elections. For example, the 8406 Bloc is a loose coalition of educated leaders in Vietnamese society, including doctors, teachers, lawyers, and clergy members, who are seeking to establish multi-party elections involving independent parties, a new constitution, and the release of imprisoned dissidents.<sup>10</sup> A recently-released dissident who was imprisoned for the national security crime of distributing leaflets hostile to the ruling party told the *Associated Press* she felt "the country was on an 'inevitable trend' toward greater freedoms."<sup>11</sup> *Business Monitor International* reports that the VCP is "facing increased pressure for change amid the growing discontent toward the

---

<sup>8</sup> Fforde, "Vietnam in 2012: The End of the Party," 103.

<sup>9</sup> CIA, *The World Factbook: East & Southeast Asia: Vietnam*.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence A. Grinter, "Vietnam's Security Challenges: Dilemmas of Reform Communism," *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 29 (2007): 92.

<sup>11</sup> Chris Brummitt, "Freed from prison, Vietnamese dissident speaks out," *The Associated Press*, August 26, 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/freed-prison-vietnamese-dissident-speaks-out>.



government in recent years, especially among the younger and more-educated population.”<sup>12</sup> Specifically, the VCP’s authoritarian tactics are reportedly serving to alienate the younger population in Vietnam, a population experiencing increased interaction with the international community via the internet.<sup>13</sup>

### Demographics

The CIA estimates that Vietnam has 92.5 million people as of July 2013, with 18.4% in the 15-24 age bracket and 44.4% in the 25-54 age bracket. As of 2011, 31% of the population lived in urban areas. Vietnam has a very high literacy rate (93.4%) and a total unemployment rate of 4.6%. While Vietnam’s youthful population is similar to that in the Arab Spring countries, Vietnam differs in that the Arab Spring countries experience higher unemployment (in the 20-30% range) and lower literacy rates (in the 70-80% range).<sup>14</sup> Much of the angst that prompted the Arab Spring revolutions was based in the negative economic conditions and low quality of life experienced by the youthful population. Analysis of the CIA data implies that the Vietnamese youthful population has a higher quality of life in comparison, possibly indicating that the youth might feel less economic and social pressure to engage in anti-regime activity. The key difference between the two groups, however, is freedom of information. In the Arab countries, while there existed religious-based restrictions on information in most of the countries, anti-regime information during the 2011 Arab Spring movement was largely initially *not* restricted by the government. When restrictions were

---

<sup>12</sup> *Business Monitor International*, “Political Outlook – Q3 2013,” May 22, 2013, <http://bmo.businessmonitor.com/cgi-bin/request.pl?view=articleviewer&article=766195&SessionID=9C3D416A31A011E3B21C1A1D7B297F78&keyword=vietnam%20dissidents>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> CIA, *The World Factbook: East & Southeast Asia: Vietnam*.

emplaced after the opposition efforts took hold, they proved largely ineffective in turning the tide of opposition that had already begun. In contrast, anti-regime or pro-democracy content in the information sphere is heavily controlled by the Vietnamese Government. While these government-imposed restrictions are currently effective in preventing the formation of an effective opposition effort, in the future it is possible that the restrictions themselves could create significant angst in the population similar to the level of angst that prompted the Arab populations to rally. It is also possible that, while unemployment levels are relatively low, a combination of information restriction and emerging economic pressures on the urban middle class from within and outside of Vietnam may be a catalyst for the population to rally for change.

### Information Infrastructure

As is similar in any developed country, Vietnam has multiple methods for information to be shared: the internet, television, telephone, radio, and newsprint. While the VCP executes physical and content control of all forms of media within Vietnam, it is the internet's interactive nature that makes it the most susceptible media for potential opposition use (based on evidence learned during the Arab Spring events). Vietnam officially connected to the internet in 1997.<sup>15</sup> The Vietnam Internet Network Information Centre (VINIC) reported there were 31.3 million internet users by the end of November 2012, which was a growth of 0.7 million users since the previous year.<sup>16</sup> The internet penetration rate is predicted to be 35.4% (32.1 million users) by the end of 2013.<sup>17</sup> The majority of the internet

---

<sup>15</sup> Surborg, "On-line with the people in line," 344.

<sup>16</sup> *Business Monitor International*, "Vietnam Telecommunications Report," Q4 (2013): 20-21, <http://www.businessmonitor.com/>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

usage is in urban areas due to the cost of purchasing internet capability. VINIC reports that the country's rural population lacks the "purchasing power" to afford personal computers or internet service, although this may change if mobile internet service grows in those rural areas.<sup>18</sup>

### Government Regulation of the Internet

The internet requires physical infrastructure connected to a geographic place. This requirement allows for the implementation of control mechanisms by a government entity. In Vietnam, right from the earliest public usage of the internet, the VCP enacted control mechanisms in an effort to prevent the transfer of anti-regime information. In 1997, prior to opening the internet to general public access, the VCP passed legislation requiring all of the international internet connections to pass through one of two government-controlled gateways as a "censorship measure to protect national security."<sup>19,20</sup> At that time, the Chief of the National Internet Board stated "in principle, the government will control the information transmitted."<sup>21</sup> In addition to control of the physical internet infrastructure via the two gateways, the 1997 regulation also required internet service providers (ISP) to be responsible for the content accessed and shared by its users, prohibiting the transfer of officially offensive information, which included anti-state information.<sup>22</sup> The VCP exercised this authority by requiring all ISPs to be licensed by the state. Another layer of control emplaced at that time was the requirement that internet content providers (ICP) keep their servers in

---

<sup>18</sup> *Business Monitor International*, "Vietnam Telecommunications Report," Q4 (2013): 20-21, <http://www.businessmonitor.com/>

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Boymal, Bill Martin, Dieu Lam, "The political economy of Internet innovation policy in Vietnam," *Technology in Society* 29 (2007): 416.

<sup>20</sup> Surborg, "On-line with the people in line," 349.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Vietnam with licensing issued by the state.<sup>23</sup> The 1997 regulation also provided authority to two government entities to be responsible for monitoring and policing adherence to the government controls. The Ministry of Culture and Information (MoCI) is responsible for establishing the guidelines governing state-approved appropriate content and for issuing the licensing for the ICPs.<sup>24</sup> The Ministry of Interior acts as the VCP's policing agent, monitoring adherence to the policies.<sup>25</sup>

Economic pressure from the business community pushed the VCP to issue revisions to the 1997 regulation in 2001. The 2001 regulation provided for a “partial liberalisation of the internet market” while placing a “more stringent emphasis on government management and licensing requirements.”<sup>26</sup> This regulation loosened the ISP licensing requirements, and the number of new ISPs in Vietnam increased. This increase resulted in market competition and lower prices for internet service, broadening the availability of the internet to the population. The 2001 regulation also directed the Ministry of Finance to be the governing body over fiscal issues related to the internet and the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications to govern the physical infrastructure within Vietnam.<sup>27</sup> While the MoCI retained its role in overseeing the content of the internet, the 2001 regulation also introduced the role of the Ministry of Public Security as the governing body “responsible for the ‘safety’ of internet activities, including ‘national safety.’”<sup>28</sup>

New regulations were introduced in 2004 to address a perceived lack of government control of internet access via internet cafes.<sup>29</sup> These regulations stated that internet café

---

<sup>23</sup> Surborg, “On-line with the people in line,” 349.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 351.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 353

owners had to provide the MoCI upon request a list of websites accessed by customers over the last 30 days and the identification of those customers.<sup>30</sup> In addition, fines for inappropriate usage against the café owners were increased. In 2005, an addendum was issued that added another government entity, the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MoPI), to the list of government entities who had some role in governing of the internet.<sup>31</sup> The MoPI governed the physical space requirements for the computers used in internet cafés and the operating hours of the cafés.<sup>32</sup>

Within the last two years, the VCP issued the newest set of regulations governing internet infrastructure and content. In 2011, Decree 2 was issued, which established sanctions against journalists who violated various content provisions.<sup>33</sup> Next issued was Decree 72, effective on 1 September 2013, which requires “all foreign websites to have at least one server in Vietnam.”<sup>34</sup> Decree 72 affords the VCP control over website activity and also increases costs to web companies with customers in Vietnam, effectively preventing internet access to the poorest people.<sup>35</sup> The decree also includes language requiring that blogs and other social media sites should only be used by the populace to share personal information and not used to share news articles.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, Decree 72 reiterated the prohibition of internet users in Vietnam posting anti-regime content that the Government assesses poses harm to national security.<sup>37</sup> Specifically, the new law bans the use of the internet to “oppose

---

<sup>30</sup> Surborg, “On-line with the people in line,” 353

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Parameswaran Ponnudurai, “Governments Want Vietnam to Review New Internet Control Decree,” *Radio Free Asia News and Information*, August 26, 2013, <http://usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1428148006?accountid=322>.

<sup>34</sup> *Reuters*, “Vietnam rebuffs criticism of ‘misunderstood’ web decree,” August 6, 2013, Facts on File World News Digest, <http://wnd.infobaselearning.com/recordurl.aspx?wid=97229&nid=107518&umbtype=1>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ponnudurai, “Governments Want Vietnam to Review New Internet Control Decree,” August 26, 2013.

<sup>37</sup> *Reuters*, “Vietnam rebuffs criticism of ‘misunderstood’ web decree,” August 6, 2013.

the Socialist Republic of Vietnam; threaten the national security, social order, and safety; sabotage the ‘national fraternity’; arouse animosity among races and religions; or contradict national traditions.”<sup>38</sup> The evolution of regulations since 1997 indicates continued attention paid by the VCP to the usage of the internet within its borders. This acute attention and new additional regulations will likely continue in the future as long as the VCP perceives that a threat to their party exists within their population.

### Content Control

The established regulations allow the VCP to restrict the flow of information into Vietnam from outside sources as well as policing the content of information exchanged within Vietnam. The control mechanisms employed by the VCP include fines levied against the ISPs for violating content laws and the threat of the ISP losing its license to operate in Vietnam.<sup>39</sup> Violations are considered criminal activities.<sup>40</sup> These control mechanisms prompt the ISPs to keep internet content within the regulations set by the government or they risk losing the economic benefits gained from providing an internet service. The 2001 regulations specifically state that people “shall be strictly prohibited [...to...] take advantage of the Internet to do hostile actions against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam or cause security unrest” (*sic*).<sup>41</sup> This demonstrates an overt focus on preventing usage of the internet to share and discuss anti-regime information. According to *CNN*, official Vietnamese press reporting from August 2013 defended the newest additions to the existing internet control laws as aimed at those who use social media to “defame the prestige and honor of others” and “incite

---

<sup>38</sup> *Cyber Report*, “Vietnam: ‘Empire Strikes Back’ With Blogger Censorship Law,” September 13, 2013, <http://www.ilccyberreport.wordpress.com/2013/09/ho-word-press.jpg>.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Surborg, “On-line with the people in line,” 353.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

hostility to the government.”<sup>42</sup> This messaging from the VCP clearly articulates a bias in the laws against internet use in support of anti-regime activities. *Cyber Report* assessed that the VCP can use Decree 72 as justification to imprison bloggers merely for sharing news items with other users in Vietnam if the news is assessed to be anti-state in nature.<sup>43</sup>

These control mechanisms have been employed by the VCP since internet use began in Vietnam and have been well documented by outside entities. In 2002, Reporters Without Borders indicated that the VCP blocked content from foreign news sites and from human rights organizations.<sup>44</sup> BBC reported, also in 2002, that the VCP blocked Vietnamese access to BBC’s Vietnamese language website, specifically content about the detention of dissidents in Vietnam.<sup>45</sup> Outside criticisms of the VCP’s control measures have continued since 2002. This past September, Reporters Without Borders stated that the newest regulations contained in Decree 72 are the “harshest offensive against freedom of information” in Vietnam since Decree 2 was issued in 2011.<sup>46</sup> They currently rank Vietnam 172 out of 179 countries in their press freedom index.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, the Freedom Online Coalition stated that Decree 72 “appears inconsistent with Vietnam’s obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as its commitments under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” whereby the UN Human Rights Council confirmed that “human rights apply online as well as offline.”<sup>48</sup> These newest regulations risk harming Vietnam’s economy by limiting foreign investment. The regulations also reinforce the ideological dispute between Vietnam and the international community over interpretation of human rights abuse. Given these risks,

---

<sup>42</sup> Peter Shadbolt, “Rights groups take aim at Vietnam’s new internet laws,” *CNN*, September 2, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com>.

<sup>43</sup> *Cyber Report*, “Vietnam: ‘Empire Strikes Back’ With Blogger Censorship Law,” September 13, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Surborg, “On-line with the people in line,” 351.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Ponnundurai, “Governments Want Vietnam to Review New Internet Control Decree,” August 26, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> *Cyber Report*, “Vietnam: ‘Empire Strikes Back’ With Blogger Censorship Law,” September 13, 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Ponnundurai, “Governments Want Vietnam to Review New Internet Control Decree,” August 26, 2013.

the fact that the VCP continues to enact increasingly strict regulations on internet usage indicates the level to which they are concerned about losing control over their populace and about the rise of anti-regime organizations.

Since the regulations clearly state that violations of the laws are considered criminal acts, it is not surprising that a number of people have been imprisoned in Vietnam for the crime of distributing or sharing anti-regime information via the internet. Regulatory tracking of information by the government allows for monitoring prevalence of social dissidence and for control over how often criminal charges are pressed against individuals.<sup>49</sup> The VCP's prosecution of violators spans social and economic lines. In April 2012, a lawyer with established connections to the Vietnamese elite class was sentenced to seven years in prison for distributing "propaganda against the state."<sup>50</sup> According to the *Korea Times*, as of August 2013, the Vietnamese Government had convicted at least 46 people of anti-state activities, including bloggers whom expressed their opinion online.<sup>51</sup> Reporters Without Borders reports currently 35 bloggers and netizens are imprisoned in Vietnam on anti-state charges, with some serving sentences as long as 13 years.<sup>52</sup> The prosecution and harshness of penalties to the individual violators creates a culture of fear and compliance by all segments of the populace. It also ensures the VCP retains the ability to effectively police adherence to their established regulations. This prevents a real growth of an opposition leadership element, an element essential to the effectiveness of the anti-regime movements.

---

<sup>49</sup> Surborg, "On-line with the people in line," 355.

<sup>50</sup> Fforde, "Vietnam in 2012," 108.

<sup>51</sup> Arthur I. Cyr, "Vietnam's controls on speech draw US criticism," *Korea Times*, August 13, 2013. [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2013/08/197\\_141017.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2013/08/197_141017.html).

<sup>52</sup> Shadbolt, "Rights groups take aim at Vietnam's new internet laws," September 2, 2013.



### VCP's Recipe for Party Sustainability

While outside groups consider Vietnam's strict internet content and usage regulations and resulting imprisonments to be human rights violations, the VCP would likely argue that they are necessary steps needed to preserve party stability within its country. The VCP would also likely argue that the regulations they enacted in 1997 prohibiting anti-regime activity on the internet were forward-leaning in preventing such information to fester and grow within their boundaries. They might also argue that their current relative political stability in the face of other regimes' downfalls illustrates the necessity and correctness of their regulations. According to the 2010 Political Instability Index published by *The Economist*, Vietnam's risk for political instability is low (ranked 139<sup>th</sup>) in comparison to other countries worldwide.<sup>53</sup>

The VCP's argument for strict internet control regulations is valid when compared to the results of the relatively permissive internet environment that existed in the Arab world prior to the Arab Spring in 2011. It was the freedom of internet usage, specifically social media software, which allowed sharing of anti-regime information, rapid organization of opposition groups, and opposition funding sources well beyond the borders of the Arab countries. While these various Arab countries quickly sought to enact controls over internet usage once the threat was realized, in some cases it was too late to stop the significant forward momentum and international recognition of the anti-regime movement. It is likely that the VCP looked to the Arab Spring as a warning sign of what could become of its authoritarian rule if its populace were allowed to converse freely via the internet and used this evidence as further justification for continued media control. It is possible, given their

---

<sup>53</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, "ViewsWire: Social Unrest," *The Economist Group*, 2013, accessed October 28, 2013, [http://viewswire.eiu.com/site\\_info.asp?info\\_name=social\\_unrest\\_table&page=noads](http://viewswire.eiu.com/site_info.asp?info_name=social_unrest_table&page=noads).

timing, that the foundations of Decree 2 and Decree 72 are based in the VCP's analysis of the Arab Spring events.

### Counter-Argument

Alternatively, it is possible that an anti-regime movement could take hold and become effective in Vietnam by exploiting a seam in VCP control caused by internal and external pressure rooted in the negative economic impacts of the strict internet regulations. Recently, a coalition of 21 countries called on Vietnam to review and amend Decree 72 due to the potential harm the regulations will do to the country's economy by limiting innovation and deterring foreign investment.<sup>54</sup> *Business Monitor International* predicts that the new regulations could cause as much as a 40% loss of Vietnamese ISP revenues, which in turn hurts the VCP's revenues since the government owns shares in the country's internet infrastructure.<sup>55</sup> Vietnam is currently experiencing a slow recovery from the economic collapse in 2007 coupled with "crippled international confidence" in Vietnam's economic growth.<sup>56</sup> The International Monetary Fund stated in 2012 that growth prospects hinge on restoration of macroeconomic stability and reforms in financial and state-owned enterprises.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, Fforde assessed that the collapse of foreign direct investment by the end of 2012 presents a burden on Vietnam's state budget "through reduced tax revenues and increased subsidies" to state-owned enterprises, many which are "effectively

---

<sup>54</sup> Ponnundurai, "Governments Want Vietnam to Review New Internet Control Decree," August 26, 2013.

<sup>55</sup> *Business Monitor International*, "Company Brief – Vietnamese Government Weighs Up Free Internet Messaging App Ban," August 23, 2013, <http://bmo.businessmonitor.com/cgi-bin/request.pl?view=articleviewer&article=802429&SessionID=474182A4326B11e3805679307B297F78&key word=%22vietnamese%20government%20weighs%20up%20internet%20mesaging%20app%20ban%22>.

<sup>56</sup> Fforde. "Vietnam in 2012," 103.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

bankrupt”.<sup>58</sup> It stands to reason then that the VCP’s control over the population, and specifically over usage of the internet, could be reduced or shattered by significant economic pressure simultaneously from within its populace and from the international community, enabling the formation of an effective opposition element.

Additionally, it is also possible that opposition elements could attempt to swarm the internet-sphere with anti-regime information overwhelming the VCP’s ability to effectively police all of the offenders and giving rise to a more open internet environment through sheer “force.” In this scenario, some dissidents, such as those seen as the instigators of the swarm, may be arrested and imprisoned for the good of the greater group, believing that the resultant large-scale defiance of the internet policies will permanently break the VCP’s control measures. For this possibility to occur, a sense of “self-sacrificing” for the reformation cause would need to permeate the Vietnamese opposition elements, with the risk that the efforts would fail to affect VCP control.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

An Arab Spring-like anti-regime movement, one that is organized, widely supported, and well-funded, is unlikely to develop in Vietnam under the current VCP control of the internet. The few known opposition groups in Vietnam will have a difficult time utilizing any type of social media or information sharing software to develop a population base or to solicit funding from sympathetic groups outside of Vietnam, which were key elements of the success of the Arab Spring movements. Vietnamese opposition groups would need to seek alternative ways of organizing, utilizing much more covert methods to elude detection by the

---

<sup>58</sup> Fforde. “Vietnam in 2012,” 104.

VCP, which will inherently limit their outreach capabilities. The VCP is unlikely to change its current internet control laws in light of the results of the Arab Spring movements, and it likely believes the internet control laws are a successful, necessary element to party sustainability. Economic pressures, such as the significant fines levied by the VCP on business owners who violate current internet laws, are a barrier to the formation of middle-class support of an opposition movement. Lastly, the demographics difference between the Vietnamese population and the Arab Spring countries' populations also likely deflates the personal emotional connection required to execute significant regime change. The VCP's strict internet control laws are likely to stay in place, and possibly increase in restrictiveness, until a point is reached where the negative consequences of the laws outweigh the benefit of the controls.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The effects of government control of the internet warrants further research to fully understand the far-reaching impacts the VCP's policies are having on a wide variety of facets of the Vietnamese populace. While the intent of the control measures is to prevent the development or spread of anti-regime sentiments or movements, the unintended negative impacts of the constraining control measures are likely felt in a number of ways. The limiting of information will likely impair Vietnam's education structure and development of advanced thought, especially among the college-aged population. The government control of the internet will most certainly significantly restrict economic development in Vietnam, particularly the deterrence of development of the technology sector, as companies looking to

invest in Southeast Asia may decide not to choose Vietnam based on the VCP's restrictive internet laws. Lastly, the transparency of local government actions and efforts to reduce corruption are inherently inhibited by the restrictive laws governing the exchanging of news and information among the Vietnamese population. In addition to these mentioned, there are likely other ways that the strict government controls negatively impact Vietnam's development and growth, and ultimately hamper its ability to realize its own potential and be seen as an equal, respected player in the world markets and society.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agency Group, 09. "Freedom Online Coalition Joint Statement on the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's Decree 72." *FDCH Regulatory Intelligence Database (August 26, 2013): Military & Government Collection*. EBSCOhost. (Accessed October 10, 2013). <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mth&AN=32W3528317942&site-ehost-live>.
- Boymal, Jonathan, Martin, Bill and Lam, Dieu. "The political economy of Internet innovation policy in Vietnam." *Technology in Society* 29 (2007):407-421. (Accessed August 24, 2013). <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/techsoc>.
- Brummitt, Chris. "Freed from prison, Vietnamese dissident speaks out." *The Associated Press*. August 26, 2013. (Accessed October 10, 2013). <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/freed-prison-vietnamese-dissident-speaks-out>.
- Business Monitor International*. "Company Brief – Vietnamese Government Weighs Up Free Internet Messaging App Ban." August 23, 2013. Telecoms. (Accessed August 24, 2013). <http://bmo.businessmonitor.com/cgi-bin/request.pl?view=articleviewer&article=802429&SessionID=474182A4326B11e3805679307B297F78&keyword=%22vietnamese%20government%20weighs%20up%20internet%20mesaging%20app%20ban%22>.
- Business Monitor International*. "Political Outlook – Q3 2013." May 22, 2013. (Accessed October 10, 2013). <http://bmo.businessmonitor.com/cgi-bin/request.pl?view=articleviewer&article=766195&SessionID=9C3D416A31A011E3B21C1A1D7B297F78&keyword=vietnam%20dissidents>.
- Business Monitor International*. "Vietnam Telecommunications Report." Q4 (2013): 20-21. (Accessed October 10, 2013). <http://www.businessmonitor.com/>
- Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook: East & Southeast Asia: Vietnam*. 22 August 2013. (Accessed 8 September 2013). <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vm.html>.
- Cyber Report*. "Vietnam: 'Empire Strikes Back' With Blogger Censorship Law." September 13, 2013. (Accessed October 10, 2013). <http://www.ilccyberreport.wordpress.com/2013/09/ho-word-press.jpg>.
- Cyr, Arthur I. "Vietnam's controls on speech draw US criticism." *Korea Times*. August 13, 2013. (Accessed October 10, 2013). [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2013/08/197\\_141017.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2013/08/197_141017.html).

- DiRienzo, Cassandra E., Jayoti Des, Kathryn T. Cort, and John Burbridge, Jr. "Corruption and the Role of Information." *Journal of International Business Studies* 38 no. 2 (March 2007): 320-332. (Accessed August 24, 2013).  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4540422>.
- Drezner, Daniel W. "Weighing the Scales: The Internet's Effect on State-Society Relations." *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 16 no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2010): 31-44. (Accessed October 10, 2013).  
<http://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/brownjwa16&div=23&collection=journals#227>.
- The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited. "ViewsWire: Social Unrest." *The Economist Group*. 2013. (Accessed October 28, 2013).  
[http://viewswire.eiu.com/site\\_info.asp?info\\_name=social\\_unrest\\_table&page=noads](http://viewswire.eiu.com/site_info.asp?info_name=social_unrest_table&page=noads).
- Fforde, Adam. "Vietnam in 2012: The End of the Party." *Asian Survey* 53 no. 1 (January/February 2013):101-108. (Accessed August 21, 2013).  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/as.2013.53.1.101>.
- Grinter, Lawrence A. "Vietnam's Security Challenges: Dilemmas of Reform Communism." *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 29 (2007): 90-103. (Accessed October 10, 2013).
- Klump, Rainer and Gerd Mutz (Hrsg.). *Doi Moi in Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Soziale und okonomische Transformation in Vietnam*. Marburg: Metropolis-Verlag, 2002. (Accessed August 24, 2013).
- Lam, Dieu, Mohini Singh, and Jonathan Boymol. *A Conceptual Model to study the Diffusion of the Internet in Vietnam*. ACIS 2002 Proceedings, Paper 2. 31 December 2002. (Accessed August 24, 2013). <http://aisel.aisnet.org/acis2002/2>.
- Pierre, Andrew J. "Vietnam's Contradictions." *Foreign Affairs* 79 no. 6 (November – December 2000): 69-86. (Accessed August 23, 2013).  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20049968>.
- Ponnudurai, Parameswaran. "Governments Want Vietnam to Review New Internet Control Decree." August 26, 2013. *Radio Free Asia News and Information*. (Accessed September 22, 2013).  
<http://usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1428148006?accountid=322>.
- Reuters. "Vietnam rebuffs criticism of 'misunderstood' web decree." August 6, 2013. Facts on File World News Digest. (Accessed August 23, 2013).  
<http://wnd.infobaselearning.com/recordurl.aspx?wid=97229&nid=107518&umbtype=1>.

Shadbolt, Peter. "Rights groups take aim at Vietnam's new internet laws." *CNN*. September 2, 2013. (Accessed October 10, 2013). <http://www.cnn.com>.

Surborg, Bjorn. "On-line with the people in line: Internet development and flexible control of the net in Vietnam." *Geoforum* 39 (2008): 344-357. (Accessed August 24, 2013). <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum>.